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Undercover Men

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One haunting mystery about the U. S. operation in Santo Domingo is too little explored. It concerns the crucial role of the Central Intelligence Agency, that strange, super-secret agency described in a notable book by David Wise and Thomas R. Ross as "The Invisible Government."

No matter how one reads the history of recent days, the conclusion is inescapable that CIA reports from the turbulent scene must have vitally influenced President Johnson's actions. From what other source could have come the sudden word that 54 disciplined Communist operatives had allegedly seized total control of a popular revolution in a few desperate hours.

It was essentially on the basis of such a document, we are told, that an emergency act to protect American lives was transformed into a massive Marine adventure unparalleled since the discredited era of "Big Stick" diplomacy.

To delay such intervention, it is contended, would have permitted an irretrievable seizure of power by men who were bent on establishing a Communist despotism overnight.

One leaves aside for the moment the question of why our intelligence agencies so often react so much more alertly to real or alleged threats from the left than from the right.

The fateful question at this juncture is the validity of the report. In the light of the testimony of many informed non-Communist Latin Americans and the absence of any fuller documentation of the charges, the case must at least be called "not proven."

But the CIA's daggers remain so cloaked in super-secrecy and so immune to ordinary inquiry that it may take months or years before the truth emerges.

Once upon a time a Senator named Joseph McCarthy proclaimed to his colleagues that he held in his hands a list of "57 card-carrying Communists" occupying strategic places in our foreign service. Fortunately no other hemispheric republic deemed this sufficient evidence to justify the landing of troops on our soil. It soon developed that what he held in his hand was a dubious assortment of gossip.

One must assume that CIA standards are somewhat more scrupulous. But the agency's record of political diagnosis is hardly characterized by infallibility, as both Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy painfully learned.

Men drawn to the business of espionage are often obsessive, adventurous types; they may possess a large capacity for stealing or eavesdropping, and a willingness to risk their lives in the process. These audacities may make them deserving of national medals, but do not qualify them for the complex business of sophisticated statesmanship.

Were such men the basic architects of our Dominican decision? Did Admiral Raborn, newly recruited from a defense industry post to assume leadership of CIA, credulously sanctify a composite of prejudgments and misjudgments? If a handful did take over, did CIA have no serious advance intimation?

History may show that the questions are unfair. But enough is known about the archives of CIA to suggest that they are warranted. One hopes President Johnson, upon whom the ultimate burden of quick decision rested, will not be reluctant to review the record before basing further action on the same sources.

Beyond the matter of panic or preconception that may have been involved in the explosive "List of 54" lie other questions. Was the document so conclusive that it swiftly and totally outweighed all other calculations—such as the world and hemispheric political consequences of unilateral intervention? Did Secretary Rusk venture an opinion on these aspects of the affair, or has he abdicated the right to such a role?

Perhaps largest of all emerges the issue of whether a democracy can afford to pay the price of such heavy reliance on an agency that daily operates as a state within a state. What is most frustrating about the present crisis is that CIA remains so invulnerable to critical examination, and that so few members of Congress are prepared to contest the arrangement.

In a defense of CIA's labors, Allen Dulles once remarked that only its failures become apparent, and that many of its successes have to be hidden for decades. Neither point is entirely valid; its failures can be long concealed, and a number of its ostensible triumphs have somehow been trumpeted. But even if Dulles were right, the CIA structure is wrong. The same man once observed that "the National Security Act of 1947... has given Intelligence a more influential position in our government than Intelligence enjoys in any other government in the world."

It is time to assert aloud that this is a symptom of national sickness rather than health. In this rough world no one is likely to suggest that the U. S. abandon all use of the undercover agent (wasteful, self-defeating and presumptuous as his work may often be). But neither should CIA be viewed as a sanctuary of indispensable supermen. That is one of the sad lessons of the Santo Domingo backfire.